

CAI  
FR 43  
- 15 P67

(Commission of Conservation)

(CANADA)

Committee on Fisheries, Game and  
Fur-bearing Animals

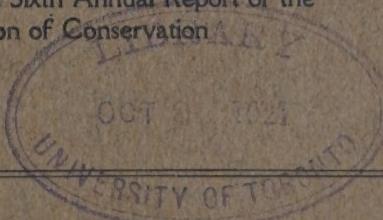
Protection of the Sea Fowl of the  
Gulf of St. Lawrence

By

JOHN M. CLARKE, Ph.D., D.Sc.

Director of the State Museum, Albany, New York

Reprinted from the Sixth Annual Report of the  
Commission of Conservation



OTTAWA—1915

3 1761 115556920



CAI  
FR73  
-15PG

# Commission of Conservation

## CANADA

---

*COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, GAME AND  
FUR-BEARING ANIMALS*

---

## Protection of the Sea Fowl of the Gulf of St. Lawrence

By

JOHN M. CLARKE, Ph.D., D.Sc.  
*Director of the State Museum, Albany, New York*

Reprinted from the Sixth Annual Report of the  
Commission of Conservation

---

OTTAWA—1915



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2022 with funding from  
University of Toronto

<https://archive.org/details/3176115556920>

## Protection of the Sea Fowl of the Gulf of St. Lawrence

---

**M**R. CHAIRMAN, ladies, and gentlemen of the Commission of Conservation : I am certainly very appreciative of the courtesy which has been extended to me in asking me to speak on such a subject as that which you have chosen. I am injecting an entirely sentimental topic into your programme, which has otherwise to do with serious matters, and it would seem as though the present of all times was not the time to present it ; but, as the Commission has thought differently, I am very glad indeed to bring to your notice a problem which is very close to me personally on account of my long acquaintance with that portion of the province of Quebec included within the Gaspe peninsula, where I have made my summer home for a period of fifteen years.

The matter before our minds at this time is, as I said, so wholly grounded in sentiment that it may seem of diminutive importance in the face of an overwhelming human issue. Whatever may be the turmoil abroad in the world, it cannot change the fact that the attitude of government toward the protection of its natural resources is an index of its best attainment. This is all the more true of an assumption which presents no possibilities of a commercial or material benefit. We recognize the fundamental proposition that the government which does not early see the importance of restraint from over-indulgence in the bounties of nature, and its seemingly inexhaustible possibility of wealth, is negligent and even suicidal. Time teaches the necessity of such restraint with the visible, and practical economy soon develops the imperative demand for uncovering the invisible, resources of the earth. The impetus to make a country yield its full flower and fruit in every direction with which nature has endowed it has been productive of the finest scientific efforts which civilization has wrought out.

Place of Water-fowl in Nature

Here, however, is a different proposition : to save to the world certain species and groups of water-fowl, now travelling the rapid road to extinction. If they are not saved, who can say the world is poorer in a material or commercial sense ? If they are saved, protected and allowed to

propagate and keep possession of their ancient domain, who can say that the world is in any wise materially the richer ? The birds that frequent the remarkable breeding places in the gulf of St. Lawrence—the venerable Bird rock, the most ancient monument of Canadian history, the cliffs of Bonaventure island and the dramatic Percé rock—are no special profit to material concerns of humanity ; no one can eat them, their eggs are no longer of moment as a source of food supply ; and, indeed, some of the members of these remarkable colonies are under present indictment of living too freely on the young fry of the salmon streams ; thus, it is alleged, affecting human happiness.

The races of these birds are on that easy road that leads to destruction. The appeal, then, if they are to be saved, must be to the trained sentiment which deprecates and mourns the destruction from off the earth of any of nature's creations ; which, as one might say, gets the proper angle and apprehends their significance in the great scheme of life. In every civilized community there is a large, a very rapidly growing and perfectly comprehensible sentiment, that would protest against a needless and an entirely avoidable destruction or waste of these products of creation. Such a sentiment is a natural emotion ; it springs both from a sympathy inborn with our aboriginal state, and from an acquired appreciation of the ages of labour and experiment on the part of nature, in trying out her methods and her products, until these ends have been reached—ends, indeed, which, though seeming final, may actually be mere passing stages on the way to something better.

In a young country, as large as yours, where population and settlement have been making a hard fight against the embarrassments of the wilderness, it is natural that immigrants and invaders should have shown a disregard of native life in so far as it fails to contribute to human comfort. But the fact is an open one, that the more dense the population, the more highly cultivated the state of the land, the greater becomes the abundance of wild life. This fact is evident throughout European countries, where, in the midst of a dense population, native races of birds, beasts and fishes are preserved in probably greater abundance and variety than even in new lands like this.

Our course towards our native species of birds has been historically incorrect until these later years. We have already permitted the total extinction of some of our native birds and the reduction of others to such scattered remnants, that extinction at an early date seems unavoidable, unless the arm of the law can reach farther than it is now doing.

**Extinct Species  
of Birds**

Our American bird fauna has suffered serious permanent losses; first and foremost, from the islands of the gulf of St. Lawrence, the great auk and the Labrador duck. To-day the passenger pigeon is gone, although at one time, as we all know, it was so tremendously abundant in this country and the United States and such an obstruction to the ordinary operations of the struggling farmers that it called forth the excommunication of the bishops. The wild turkey, sacred to the Puritan harvest feast, is exterminated from Canada; the whooping crane, the trumpeter swan, the golden plover, the Hudsonian godwit, are all nearly extinct; the willet and the dowitcher are also on the same declining path.

Now, so far as our birds contribute to the protection of our commercial assets, in so far as they prevent by many millions of dollars in annual value the destruction of our agricultural crops, our forest and shade trees through the incursions of noxious insects, just in so far there is an imperative reason why they should be safeguarded by every restraint within the power of the people. No argument is needed and no defense is required for the much talked of "restriction of personal liberty" in the destruction of insect-eating birds. We have reached and passed that point. Nothing can so irrevocably restrict personal liberty to hunt and shoot as the entire destruction of game, and this very selfish consideration alone is efficient in the execution of the protective laws; and yet it is questionable whether our restrictive measures have been taken in time to be fully effective.

**Birds in the  
Scheme of  
Nature**

During my journey to Ottawa, I read a statement in the press relating to the Commission on Industrial Relations which is investigating the finances of some of the foundations such as the Rockefeller foundation. The chairman of that Commission, who is from Missouri, said that he noticed that \$250,000 had been set aside from the fund of the Rockefeller foundation, to provide a safe retreat for migratory birds. It is true that sum was expended to reserve certain islands on the South Atlantic coast for migratory birds. He welcomed the protest that had come to him that this money might better have been expended to establish a safe retreat for the wives and babies of the Colorado coal miners. I happened to have in my pocket at the time, the last number of the *Canadian Forestry Journal* which I had just received. In it, I found a little poem, which I think completely supplied the answer to his argument. The lines, which are by Mr. Ralph Hodgson, one of the younger English poets, are as follows:

## STUPIDITY STREET

I saw with open eyes  
Singing birds sweet,  
Sold in the shops  
For the people to eat—  
Sold in the shops of  
Stupidity Street.

I saw in vision  
The worm in the wheat,  
And in the shops nothing  
For people to eat—  
Nothing for sale in  
Stupidity Street.

## Protective Legislation

There is a fundamental principle here upon which the effectiveness of game laws and general protective methods must be estimated, and it is the sole criterion by which we can be guided. No system of protection can be efficient if, under it, the native birds or animals are still diminishing from year to year. Such a condition would be of itself proof that we are destroying more than the annual increase and using up both interest and capital ; and it is to my mind an open question whether our present laws have up to this time been effective in this regard. So much they have effected, that the falling off of the native races is less rapid, but there is an actual annual diminution, even though, in some instances, small, and progressive diminution spells extinction. I cannot undertake to speak of the relative merits of general laws of protection, but incidentally may observe that in my own state the inefficiency of the general protective laws, outstanding for some years past, has led to later very severe and stringent regulations in virtue of which it has become an offence to destroy any of the native races of birds, with discriminations against an exceedingly small number regarded as reckless in their disregard of agricultural and fishing interests. I refer to this law without any special reference to open and close game seasons.

I would like to say another word regarding the existing system of protective laws in respect to its failing to meet the requirements of adequate bird protection. If we can not through legislation sufficiently reduce the destructive agencies acting upon species which are actually vanishing, particularly a considerable number of our game species whose fate now hangs in the balance ; if we can not

instill into the pot-hunter, the resident or citizen foreign to our mode of thought and our high purposes, of the man out of the reach of observation, who thinks to deceive others while indulging himself; if we can not make the executive effect of our laws reach into those remote corners where these native races are propagating, then we must turn to the encouragement of a proper spirit and sentiment amongst our citizens, encourage, not merely actual respect and regard for these races, but active interest in their preservation, by the erection and protection of places which are to be totally exempted from a hunter's privileges. Preserves, reservations, bird sanctuaries, places of refuge, where such security can be afforded, become more and more a necessity as the remoter regions of our land become more readily accessible and more fully settled.

**Bird and Game  
Reservations**

Our Governments—yours and mine—in the splendid national parks which have been set apart, have furnished almost ideal conditions for the safe reproduction of the species of birds that naturally inhabit them, but these are great parks, and, from their size and cost of maintenance, must always be too few in number to sufficiently supplement other means of protection. We find growing up about us in the salutary development of public sentiment on this matter of protection, private refuges for bird and beast. I count it among the wholesome developments of our civilization that reserved spots on this estate, on that private domain, a breeding place near some municipality taken in charge by some private organization—that such refuges as these are increasing. I find, too, in such a proposition as has been brought to the attention of the province of Quebec by Lieut.-Col. Wood regarding the sanctuaries or refuges for the native races of animals in the Quebec Labrador, a fine expression of the earnest desire and purpose of the lover of nature to protect the works of nature.

It is needless for me to say that small areas taken at random can accomplish much toward the preservation of our natural bird species, but to be effective, a small reservation must be segregated at some point to which the failing species themselves have made resort because of the especial attractions and facilities the places offer for their multiplication ; and this brings us immediately to the consideration of the islands of the gulf of St. Lawrence and their bird colonies.

Time was, in the early days, when all the islands off the coast of the gulf and in the gulf of St. Lawrence and off the coast of the Labrador, were to our Atlantic coast what the islands of the Hebrides, St. Kilda, Ailsa Craig on the west and Bass rock on the east of

Scotland, the Skelligs off Kerry, and its neighbours off Devonshire—all these islands with their wondrous colonies of these very birds with which our attention is now concerned—have been to Britain.

#### PRESENT CONDITION OF NESTING PLACES IN THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE

##### The Bird Rocks

These islands, constituting the northernmost member of the Magdalen Islands group, belong to the county of Gaspe. They lie 120 miles out in the gulf and consist of three isolated rock masses, the first, or the Great Bird, covering about seven acres, and the Lesser Birds, which are two bare rock masses, lying close at hand on the west, and being little more than rock reefs. The Great Bird has no human population except the lightkeeper and his assistants. The bird colony here consists of several species of water-fowl of which the gannet or solan goose is preponderant, the others being the razor-bill auk, the puffin, the murres and the kittiwake.

In the days of the early settlements, the "Isles de Margaulx," as they were called by Cartier, housed an enormous and numberless colony. When Audubon visited the place in 1833 he found and made record of what was not generally known at the time, that the attacks of the eggers upon the gannet nests here and elsewhere, particularly on the Labrador coast, resulted in the collecting of some hundreds of thousands of eggs annually, which were sold in the New York and Boston markets. These attacks have undoubtedly been the cause of the extinction of the gannet roosts on the islands and coasts of the Labrador, on Perroquet island and on Grand Manan. Since the establishment of the light on Bird rock the attacks of the eggers on this colony have diminished, but the colony has been, and is yet, exposed to the demands of the fishermen for eggs and to the incidental killing of the birds.

##### Census of Bird Colonies

The history of this bird colony has been fairly summarized in the recent publication, *The Gannet*, by J. H. Gurney, F.Z.S. (London, 1913), and the statement there incorporated in regard to the census of the colony ten years ago, quoted from observations made by Mr. A. C. Bent, would make the total of the colony about 10,000 birds, of which there were 2,500 gannets, 2,000 kittiwakes, 1,800 razor-bills, 1,600 brunnich murres, 1,400 murres, 100 ring murres, and 600 puffins.

My visits to this colony have been of more recent date, 1910-11, and, without attempting to make an estimate of the total population, I believe that the gannet element in the colony is larger than above intimated and that the total census of the birds would probably not

fall below 15,000. In my judgment, the colony is not, at the present time, decreasing, and I think this is due largely to the comparatively few visits being made in these latter days to the islands by collectors of birds and of birds' eggs.

The Bird rock with its adjoining islands being Crown lands, guardianship could, in my judgment, be most efficiently accomplished by assigning that duty to the inspector of fisheries on the Gaspe coast. This official, having a cruiser at his disposal, is more frequently on the Magdalen islands than any other official of the Government. Having supervisory functions, he could, with the aid of the light-keeper as guardian on the ground, exercise a forcible protection of the place.

**Bonaventure Island Colony** The bird colony on Bonaventure island has the same constitution as that on Bird rock. This island lies three miles off the coast from the village of Percé. It is private property, and its area of about six square miles is practically held in fee by the present occupants, among which is one of the oldest fishing establishments on the Gulf.

During the past summer, at the instance of the Geological Survey, Mr. P. A. Taverner, with his assistants, made a special study of this colony, and the breeding habits of the birds, and endeavoured to make an approximate count of the number of birds there.\* Here, also, the gannet is paramount in numbers, and I believe Mr. Taverner's judgment is, subject to reservation and correction, that the gannet population on the island is approximately between 7,000 and 8,000. This is a very much larger number than is assigned to the gannets of the Bird Rock colony, and demonstrates that the Bonaventure colony as a whole—assuming that there is approximately the same numerical relation amongst the other species there nesting—is very much the largest colony of these water-fowl in the Gulf, and hence on the Atlantic coast of North America.

**Unique Conditions on Island** This colony finds its nesting places on the vertical eastern ledges of Bonaventure island, which rise sheer to a height of about 400 feet, and stretch over a length of about a mile and a quarter. They are well protected from above, but now that the day of the motor boat has arrived, they are bare and exposed from below, and the destruction which has been inflicted upon them of late years by "the fool with a gun" has been appalling. This statement will, I believe, be verified by the investigations and reports of Mr. Taverner.

The protection of this very remarkable, if not altogether unique, nesting place, presents some provisional obstacles in the way of

\*See Appendix III.

administration. I have secured from the property owners a tentative promise to deed the ends of their lots bounding the bird ledges, in exchange for the construction of a fence near the edge of the cliff, which would prevent their sheep and cattle from falling over. The erection of this fence may be reasonably assured, but the proper administration of this property, thus deeded for a specific purpose, and the maintenance of a warden, are matters still open for determination. If it lies within the powers of the Parks Branch of the Department of the Interior to assume protection of these bird ledges as such, without incursion upon the property rights of the owners of the land, such action would, in my judgment, be the simplest solution of what has appeared to me a somewhat complicated problem.

Because of the accessibility of this colony, its great and apparently increasing size, it is now recognized as one of the wonders of the Gulf coast and is visited daily during the tourist season. These facts seem to demand early and vigilant action for its protection.

Percé Rock  
Bird Colonies      Percé rock, off the village of Percé—the most dramatic scenic feature on all the Atlantic coast — is the abode of a colony composed of two species, namely, the herring gull and the crested cormorant. This venerable assemblage has been here since the beginnings of human history on the coast, and the upper surface of the rock has never, so far as records show, been the breeding place of any other species.

A year ago an indictment was brought against the cormorants of this colony, accusing them of destroying the young fry of the salmon in the many salmon streams of the mainland adjoining. The indictment was followed by an order, subsequently suspended, to destroy the cormorant colony. The investigations of ornithologists have failed to prove that the cormorant feeds especially on the young of the salmon. After somewhat diligent inquiry of authoritative sources, I have failed to find any ornithologist who would say that this accusation has been proven, and I think I may take the liberty of saying that the investigations of Mr. Taverner are not confirmatory of the indictment.

Percé rock, for its unique beauty, for its extraordinary scientific interest, and for its bird colony, presents strong claims for reservation. The fishermen along the coast do not regard these birds as their enemies. They help themselves, now and again, it is true, to the contents of the herring nets, but where herrings occur in untold millions the birds' necessary appetite for fish food involves damage to human interests which is certainly negligible. Moreover, the birds are so intimate a part of the human

interests of the countryside, that I may express with confidence the feeling of the fishermen as wholly in their favour. Yet, this colony is exposed to constant attacks, for the young gull, when on the beaches still unable to fly, falls an easy victim to the attacks of the fishermen, it being to them a favourite viand.

#### PROTECTION OF THE BONAVENTURE AND PERCÉ COLONIES

In presenting the claims of these bird colonies to your consideration, it seems proper that I should recommend also to your notice a practicable procedure concerning their guardianship. A single warden is all that will be required for this purpose, and there lives on Bonaventure island a man by the name of William Duval, a descendant of the original owner of the island, whose interest in these birds is very keen. He is daily back and forth from the island to the mainland, is known to me to be faithful, trustworthy and efficient, and he is by all means the best man to act in the capacity of warden of these two nesting places during the months of the presence of the birds, from April to October, inclusive.

---





